

VZCZCXRO0589
PP RUEHSL
DE RUEHRO #1040/01 2511606
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 081606Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2637
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0525
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 0208
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY 3778
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 3987
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3038
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 001040

SIPDIS

OSD FOR MAGGIE SADOWSKA
EUR/RPM FOR RAPHAEL CARLAND AND AARON COPE
JCS J5 FOR THERESE PAWLOWSKI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/09/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [IT](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: MOD LA RUSSA REQUESTS OCTOBER MEETING WITH SECDEF:
POST STRONGLY FAVORS

REF: A. ROME 177
[1](#)B. ROME 424
[1](#)C. ROME 851
[1](#)D. ROME 877

ROME 00001040 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Elizabeth Dibble for Reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. An adviser to Italian MOD La Russa told Post on September 3 that La Russa would like a meeting with Secretary Gates in Washington the week of October 6-11. Post strongly recommends that SecDef accept the visit, which La Russa needs in order to bolster the strong case he is making in the Cabinet in favor of increased Italian engagement in Afghanistan and continued strong commitment in UNIFIL, KFOR, NTM-I and other key missions. The decree funding Italy's overseas missions expires at the end of October, and Italy's Finance Minister can be expected to oppose La Russa's efforts to protect funding for Italian security missions abroad. La Russa has not yet had a meeting in Washington with his U.S. counterpart; both PM Berlusconi and FM Frattini have had several such opportunities during Italy's G8 year. However, it is worth noting that La Russa is probably the strongest proponent of the Afghan mission within the GOI. He has injected new life into Italy's once-flagging military effort in Afghanistan with 525 Election Support troops and a pledge of 160 new Carabinieri police trainers. Italian troops are fighting insurgents in RC-West with a level of dedication and risk-taking rarely seen before. Now that the August 20 elections have passed and calls for an "exit strategy" are being heard on both sides of the Atlantic, that commitment needs bucking up. Impending U.S. troop increases in RC-West may complicate this picture by creating coordination problems with Italian forces or conveying the impression that U.S. planners believe Italian troops are not up to the task. Visible, high-level consultations between USG and Italian Officials would do much to counteract the political and fiscal forces exerting downward pressure on Italian development assistance and troop levels. End Summary.

Italy's Afghanistan Surge: Largely La Russa's Doing
- - - - -

[1](#)2. (C) Alessandro Ruben, a close political adviser to MOD La

Russa, told Pol M/C on September 3 that La Russa would like to travel to Washington to meet with Secretary Gates sometime in the October 6-11 timeframe. Post strongly recommends that SecDef accept this proposal, or if the dates are not practical, to offer a different date before the end of October, when La Russa must negotiate a renewal of the decree funding Italian military missions abroad. Ruben stressed that La Russa needs the boost of a meeting with SecDef to help him to continue to make his strong case for increased Italian participation in Afghanistan.

13. (C) Before the NATO Summit in April, Italy's commitment to Afghanistan was being gradually undermined by the GOI's aversion to casualties and unwillingness to dedicate the necessary resources to the effort (Ref A). Since then, largely as a result of PM Berlusconi's desire to be responsive to President Obama's call for greater allied commitment to Afghanistan, Italy has turned its mission around with new injections of troops, funding, and political will (Refs B and C). Although Berlusconi provided the impetus for this turnaround, MOD Ignazio La Russa did the heavy lifting, finding creative ways to fund the increase in the midst of deep budget cuts ordered by Italy's Finance Minister Tremonti. Italy pledged 525 new Election Support Force (ESF) troops at Strasbourg, raising its troop level from about 2,700 to 3,200, and pledged a fivefold increase in the number of Carabinieri training Afghan police (from 40 to 200 trainers). The elite paratroopers of the Folgore brigade were deployed to Afghanistan in April and have been given the political backing by MOD La Russa to engage aggressively with insurgent forces in Farah, Baghdis and Herat provinces -- reversing a multi-year trend of conflict avoidance that had characterized previous Italian deployments. The result was a largely successful election day in RC-West: 92 per cent of

ROME 00001040 002.2 OF 003

polling stations were able to open, and only a smattering of security incidents were reported.

14. (C) Doing this was not easy: MOD La Russa struggled to convince Berlusconi and FinMin Tremonti to free up funds to support the extra forces, and even then only succeeded in obtaining funding through October 2009. Italian defense and foreign aid budgets were slashed this year, forcing GOI planners to raid other MOD and MFA programs to pay for the Afghan surge. After an Italian soldier was killed in July, Members of Parliament on both the right and left began to call for an "exit strategy," and Northern League leader Bossi (Berlusconi's key partner in the governing coalition) called for troops to be brought home after the August 20 elections (Ref D). Bossi moderated his tone after MOD La Russa and FM Frattini publicly condemned his remarks, but allegations of electoral fraud in Afghanistan have strengthened the hand of those who say Italy should not be there for the long haul. The continuity of the mission is not in danger -- for the moment -- because a broad consensus in the center-right majority as well as the main opposition party backs Italy's participation in ISAF. However, should the Northern League or parliamentarians from other parties raise more doubts about the mission, we could see an erosion of Italy's newfound willingness to engage in aggressive operations or maintain its current expanded troop presence.

15. (C) Given that the current decree providing funding for the mission expires in October, the increasingly difficult fiscal environment makes it quite possible that FinMin Tremonti will prevail, thus putting in jeopardy any possible extension of ESF troops past October. If so, troop levels could subside well below pre-election levels (2,700), and funds for airlift, armored vehicles and other equipment could also be cut. La Russa is a powerful political figure in Berlusconi's People of Liberty Party (PDL), but by publicly defending Italy's participation in ISAF and allowing his commanders in the field to take greater risks, La Russa is himself taking a significant political risk: if Italian forces incur further casualties, he will likely face serious

criticism in the press and in Parliament. In addition, Italian civilian and military officials have already expressed concerns to us that impending U.S. troop increases in RC-West may create new command and control challenges and possibly convey the impression that U.S. planners believe Italian troops are not up to the task.

Italian Commitments to UNIFIL, KFOR, NTM-I Also At Risk
- - - - -

¶6. (C) Afghanistan is not the only Italian mission facing the budget knife, however; Italy commands UNIFIL and KFOR and contributes the lion's share of troops in each mission. Italy is the leading non-U.S. contributor to the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) and the Carabinieri lead the police training mission within NTM-I. Italy is a leading contributor to the NATO and EU anti-piracy missions, and the U.S. and Italy co-fund the Carabinieri training center for UN Formed Police Units in Vicenza (CoESPU), the only one of its kind in the world. All of these missions are facing the possibility of severe budget cuts this fall, and La Russa will have to fight for every Euro. He is ably assisted by FM Frattini, but the task is becoming ever more difficult due to budgetary difficulties.

¶7. (C) Comment: There is a high level of consensus among both the center-right and center-left opposition in favor of the Afghan mission. However, politicians from Berlusconi's People of Liberty party often confide to us that main reason that Italy is still playing a significant role in Afghanistan is that the U.S. wants it to, and that public opinion would be happier to see the troops come home, particularly if conditions in Afghanistan this fall increase the likelihood of higher casualties. A close advisor to FinMin Tremonti confided to us earlier this year that in its budget process, the GOI usually seeks to allocate for defense the "bare minimum that will keep Washington happy." It is important for La Russa, FM Frattini and Berlusconi himself to be able

ROME 00001040 003.2 OF 003

to demonstrate that their U.S. counterparts have made personal appeals to stay the course in Afghanistan. Of the three, La Russa is the only one not yet to have been received by his counterpart in Washington during the Obama Administration. A meeting with SecDef in Washington would go a long way toward buttressing La Russa's Afghan commitment. End Comment.

THORNE